

The Altar of Witness
Joshua 22:10-34

That was a very interesting story, and it would be easy to draw the obvious lessons from it – about how we shouldn't jump to conclusions or why clear communication is so important. Isn't it a good thing that God's people talked with one another before going to war over what was essentially just a misunderstanding? Great – let's turn the page to Joshua's stirring farewell address.

But before we move on, there are a few points we might want to clear up. For did you wonder why the altar that the men of Reuben and Gad and Manasseh had built was such a big deal to the rest of God's people? I mean, why should the tribes who ended up settling on the western side of the Jordan River care if the tribes who settled on the eastern side built a big altar? Even if the easterners had built it on the western side of the river, it couldn't have taken up much space. Why not just live and let live? Why does verse 12 say they were immediately willing to go to war over something that seems so trivial?

And this is the same sort of question we Christians hear more and more these days, especially where marriage and family issues are concerned. Why should we care if two men or two women want to marry one another? Why should we care if a pastor in another congregation wants to conduct a same-sex wedding? Why should we care if a male pastor in another presbytery wants to have a husband or a female pastor wants to have a wife? As long as our congregation isn't directly involved, what difference does it make? Why can't we live and let live?

Well, why were the westerners in today's passage willing to go to war? In verse 16, they said that building such an altar amounted to rebellion against the Lord. And why? Because as verse 19 says, there was only supposed to be one altar for the Lord their God, only one altar on which sacrifices were to be made – the altar in front of the Tabernacle.

And the interesting thing is that the easterners were in complete agreement on this point. They agreed that it would indeed have been rebellion against God for them to build any other altar to offer any kind of sacrifice. In fact, in verse 22, they agreed that if they had in fact been guilty of such rebellion their lives did not deserve to be saved.

But what does any of that mean for us today? We know we don't need to offer animal sacrifices in order to be forgiven of our sins. In fact, we know we don't need to offer any sort of gift to be accepted in the sight of God. No, we know that what Jesus said in our responsive reading from John chapter 17 is true. We know that God is the only true God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son. And we know that He has finished the saving work the Father sent Him to do on the cross. And we know that all who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord are not only forgiven of our sins, but that we are welcomed into God's covenant family. In fact, we are filled with the very Spirit of Christ.

Yes, we know all that. But at the time the eastern tribes built their altar on the west bank of the Jordan River, the only way people could get a glimpse of God's great plan of salvation was to take their offerings to the Tabernacle. For it was only in the Tabernacle that the Ark of the Covenant was placed, symbolizing God's presence among His people. It was only at the Tabernacle that they could get a glimpse of Jesus, the light of the world and the Bread of Heaven, in the Golden Lampstand and on the golden Table of the Bread of the Presence. And so, it was only on the bronze altar in front of the

Tabernacle that people could see how their sacrifices pointed to the much greater sacrifice that would one day be made for them – the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

And so there's one very important lesson that we can learn from the fact that God's people were willing to go to war over the altar the eastern tribes constructed: we simply can't make any compromises where it comes to the saving work of Christ. We can't agree to live and let live where it comes to the essentials of the Christian faith – that Scripture alone teaches us that salvation for sin comes by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and that in response to God's sovereign grace we must live for the glory of God alone. As Jesus so clearly said in John 17:17, we are sanctified, we are set apart from sin and set apart for God by these great truths, truths that we can only learn from the Word of God.

And that means that, when we see the clear teachings of the Word of God ignored or neglected within the Church, we can't just live and let live – we have to take a stand. Of course, different parts of the Word have come under attack in different generations. In the days of Martin Luther and John Calvin, people were tempted to put their faith in the Church rather than in Christ. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people were tempted to put their faith in human reason rather than in the Scriptures. Today, many say that our emotions are the best test of truth, that people are defined by their attractions, and that if anything feels good it must be okay, regardless of what the Scriptures may teach.

And because some things just can't be compromised, it's no wonder that the Church has suffered division after division through the years. Protestants have divided from Roman Catholics, Presbyterians and Methodists from Anglicans. This congregation separated from the PCUSA over the question of Biblical fidelity. Like both the western and the eastern tribes of Joshua's time, we decided that we could not tolerate rebellion against God and His clear commandments.

But before we congratulate ourselves too much, there's another lesson we find here, another truth on which all of God's people agreed. For if they weren't planning to offer sacrifices on that altar, why did the easterners build it in the first place? Well, what did they say? They knew they would be living across the Jordan River from the Tabernacle, and they knew that, over time, the river might become more and more of a cultural barrier. So, they built an altar on the west side of the Jordan to bear witness that those living on the east side were still a part of God's people. They built it to ensure that their descendants wouldn't be excluded from God's worship.

And once again, we see that the westerners were in complete agreement. After all, one reason they were willing to go to war over the altar was because they also believed in the unity of God's people. In verse 20, they pointed to the sin of Achan, whose story we read back in Joshua chapter 7. Remember, back when God's people captured the city of Jericho, God had told them to destroy all the valuable things in the city. But one man, Achan, couldn't resist taking some of the loot. He stole some silver and gold and clothes and hid them in his tent.

Why was that such a big deal? What difference did one man's sin make? Well, the next time the people of God tried to capture a city, they did not succeed. In fact 36 soldiers died in the attempt – and God made it clear that the reason for their failure was Achan's rebellion against God's law. In short, one man's sin resulted in a defeat for the whole congregation.

And so, the western tribes drew the obvious conclusion: if the eastern tribes got involved in some sort of idolatry, the western tribes would somehow get caught up in the blame. And to show how serious such a problem could be, in verse 17 they pointed to another historical example – the time when lots of God’s people gave in to the temptation to worship false gods at Peor. On that occasion, a great plague broke out among them, and Numbers 25 tells us that 24,000 people died as a result.

In short, if the altar the easterners built teaches us that we must not compromise on the essentials of the Christian faith, it also underlines the essential unity of the Christian Church. And that means that whenever error or heresy afflicts any part of the Church, we all suffer. We all bear the blame, especially in the eyes of outsiders.

Today’s controversies should make that abundantly clear. For let’s face it – we may understand the subtle differences between the EPC and the ECO and the PCA and the PCUSA and the OPC and the ARP and all the many other denominations, the “split P’s” that stem from our common Presbyterian roots. But to most of the Christians around us, all those letters are so much alphabet soup. To them, Presbyterian is Presbyterian, and it’s just a weird word that no one knows how to spell.

And the fact is that most Roman Catholics don’t see any real difference among all the many Protestant denominations– Presbyterians and Pentecostals alike are just “Evangelicals” to them. And the increasing number of non-Christians who live among us tend to lump all of us Christians together, no matter what our denominational distinctives may be.

And that means that when a mainline Presbyterian church allows two men to get married, all the rest of us “split P’s” get tarred with the brush of liberalism. It means that when a priest is caught abusing altar boys, all of us pastors lose some credibility. And most seriously, it means that when Christians stop talking to one another because they disagree over the color of the carpet in the Sanctuary, or when congregations refuse to cooperate over clearly minor, clearly non-essential theological differences, the world around us loses any reason to believe the gospel that we preach. For why should they believe what we say about the love of God when we can’t even love one another?

And didn’t Jesus make this same point in our responsive reading from John 17? He prayed “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” He prayed, “that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.”

In other words, Jesus said that the world would believe that He was in fact the promised Messiah, the world would believe that the Father had sent Him to save us from our sins, precisely because of the unity of the Church – not only the Church’s unity with Christ, but the Church’s unity with one another. So just as our lack of unity in our understanding of theology and ethics results in all of us sharing the blame for any of our failures, our lack of unity also cripples our attempts at evangelism. And we see the critical importance of the unity of the Church so clearly displayed both in the easterners’ desire to build that altar on the western side of the Jordan and from the westerners’ initial reaction to it.

So, wouldn’t it be great if we could restore the unity of the Church as easily as they did? Wouldn’t it be great if all our divisions were just innocent misunderstandings that could be so quickly cleared up? But no matter how important the unity of the Church is, given what this passage has also taught us about the necessity of contending for the essentials of the faith, we can’t just ignore all the

significant theological truths that divide us. So, how can we pursue both the purity and the unity of the Church, each of which is critical to the success of our mission to the world?

Well, let's look at what the westerners were willing to do. Sure, they were willing to go to war, putting their lives on the line to stop the spread of idolatry. But verse 19 says they were also willing to make a big economic sacrifice.

For remember, chapters 13 through 21 are largely made up of extensive lists of cities and towns allotted to each tribe, careful descriptions of the territory each tribe would inherit. But verse 19 basically says that, if it would keep the easterners from falling into idolatry, the westerners were willing to tear up all those plans and start over. They were willing to divide the land on the west side of the Jordan not nine-and-a-half ways but twelve ways, giving up some of their land so that the easterners would have an inheritance among them. And in those days when most people were farmers or herdsmen, access to land was the key to prosperity, even to survival. That means that, to promote the purity and the unity of the church, they were willing to take a big hit where it mattered most – in the pocketbook.

And think again about the prayer that Jesus prayed for the Church in John chapter 17. He wanted all of us to be sanctified in the truth. He wanted all of us to be one with one another and one with Him just as He is One with the Father. But what did answering this prayer cost Him? That very night, He allowed Himself to be arrested and beaten, and the very next day He allowed Himself to be crucified. Could He give up anything more?

So, what about us? What are we willing to give up to demonstrate our oneness with our brothers and sisters in Christ? We might have to give up some control if we're going to join in with other congregations' or denominations' mission projects. We might have to give up some convenience if other congregations' programs or prayer meetings go on too long. We might have to give up some comfort if other congregations' worship services get a little too loud or if they do things we might consider strange.

But what sort of witness could we bear to other Christians if we were willing to reach out to one another, to give up some control and some convenience and some comfort to show our respect and love? What sort of witness could we bear to the wider world? And come to think of it, unless we are willing to engage with other Christians and talk with other Christians, how can we hope to help each other come to a greater knowledge of the one truth that sanctifies all of us?

No, pursuing the peace, and the unity, and the purity of the church is never easy. But there's really no other way to bear witness to both the truth and the love of Christ. And if we love all the people for whom He died, can we do anything else?